



## LEVINE WILL FOREGO AUSSIE OPEN

When Jesse Levine had finished up a couple of training hours on court with Sebastien Grosjean this morning, there were still no changes on the other side of the world at the Australian Open. He was still five spots out of the main draw and his mind was made up.

He's not going. Not going to Melbourne next month to play the quallies for this opening Grand Slam of the 2010 season. Not going Down Under in hopes that five guys will pull up lame and hand him a spot in a major.

"That's a long trip. I needed this break and this is a chance for me to stay home a little longer, rest up, get fitter and, hopefully, make this my breakthrough year," he explained.

Besides, the wisdom of Andy Roddick continues to reverberate in both ears: "Can I say something?" Roddick had asked him after they'd finished up a workout a couple weeks ago and were discussing 2010 schedules. "Don't chase the points. Focus on the matches."

And so, when this long break at his home in Boca Raton, Fl., and the daily workouts at the nearby USTA training facility at the Evert Academy are done, Levine is off to chase the matches -- not the points -- beginning with a couple \$50,000 Challengers in Hawaii and Dallas and then regular ATP events at San Jose and Memphis before his hometown tournament at Delray Beach, Fl.

After two full seasons on the ATP trail, lefty Levine has a much fuller understanding about what it's going to take for an undersized scrapper to not only rise above his current No. 115, but press hard for the top 50. Or more.

He's one of a handful of younger American men (Wayne Odesnik, Ryan Sweeting, Brandan Evans, Donald Young) have flashed here, flashed there but who have yet to display the consistency it will take to reach higher levels of the pro tour. But of this current group, despite his 158 pounds, Levine has the most potential.

"Yeah, I got on the scale the other day," Levine began laughing. "Then I told my mom, '158, a personal high!' " He's not going to look, from the stands, much different than he did a couple years ago after leaving the University of Florida after one season to pursue a pro career. But there can't be any debate about the improvement in his fitness level.

It was there in 2009 when he qualified at Wimbledon and then stunned Marat Safin in the opening round. It was there in the next round when he won a five-setter against Pablo Cuevas. It was there for good wins against No. 48 Philipp Petzschner at Newport and No. 66 Andrey Golubev at the Canadian Open.

It was not, however, there, when he went down badly after winning the opening two sets against No. 17 Marin Cilic at the U.S. Open -- two of those sets bagels.

But he's being pushed daily in practice this month at the Evert Academy by top U.S. men's coach Jay Berger and will be during much of the 2010 season by retired Sgt/Maj Keith Williams, who once ran a boot camp at a real U.S. Marine base for USTA juniors.

The two have forged a bond and Williams has now been with Levine since Wimbledon, driving him hard in his off-court work. He's not a tennis guy, but he is, said Levine, "a fitness coach, a life coach and a mentor. It's the way he helps you go about life, making you feel how lucky you are to be making a living on a tennis court."

The Levine serve is a bit more pumped than when he began this pro odyssey in 2007, but really not by much. His stock in trade is still high speed, very quick-twitch feet and aggression. He can make a living grinding at the baseline, but his volleying is a major weapon, too.

What makes Levine special among the other young Americans you run into is that he's the one you WANT to succeed. He's got the Roddick attitude and the Roddick work ethic. Good person. Good heart. Generous. All the right qualities. Unfortunately, he'll never have the Roddick serve or the power of John Isner, one of his best friends on tour.

But he'll make due with what he's got and if he can stay uninjured, he can slip deep into the top 100. No one doubts his commitment. "The times I've broken top 100 is when I've been working really, really hard," he explained. "When I focus on that, success happens."

He's going to have to focus on that every day for the rest of his career.

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